



Robert Upton shows his recently released book, "Racism@Work Among the Lord's People." The book addresses the failure of churches to tackle racism.

PRESS PHOTO/GARY W. MORRISON

Book targets dearth of church diversity

By Gary W. Morrison
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Christian churches aren't prepared for the racial revolution coming in the next 50 years, Robert Upton observes.

"I've met with pastors who want to address racism or met others who wanted to do something, but do not know how," said Upton, a Grand Rapids church consultant and evangelist.

"I've also met others who just buried the problem."

Upton, 39, wrote a book aimed at getting church leaders to look ahead to a more diverse nation, where whites will make up less than half the population by 2050, according to Census projections.

"Racism@Work Among the Lord's People," addresses the failure of churches to tackle issues of prejudice, bigotry and racism, he said.

Churches that ignore the country's growing diversity will cease to exist or have for-sale signs on their front lawns, he added.

"Many more people of color will be coming through the doors of churches," Upton said.

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Upton, a fair housing officer for the city of Grand Rapids, is senior consultant for Upton Consulting in Grand Rapids, a management firm for churches, corporations and nonprofit groups.

The book targets church leaders or individuals who want to deal with personal feelings toward people of other races.

Chapters include questions that challenge people to think about the topic, such as "How would you feel about your son or daughter marrying a person of color?"

To whites, he poses this question: "Do you let your friends tell

stereotypical jokes about persons of color? If yes, why?"

To minorities, he asks, "Have you invited a person of non-color over to your house for dinner? How would you feel about your son or daughter dating a person of non-color?"

The book has the potential to alter people's lives, said Upton's pastor, the Rev. Scott Hagan of Grand Rapids First (Assembly of God) church in Wyoming. Hagan's own drive to diversify his church has boosted minority ranks to about 300 members out of 2,200.

"We're going to promote the book from the pulpit," Hagan

said. "We want everyone in the church to read this book."

The idea for the book came from Upton's encounter with a man who said he was inspired at a racial diversity meeting to build a relationship with a person of color.

The man asked Upton to get together with him on a monthly basis.

"I only received two phone calls from this person in seven years since we had lunch," Upton said.

He wrote the shell of the manuscript in about six months, but took a break at the time his father, Robert Upton Sr., was dying after a 13-year struggle with cancer.

That gave him renewed perspective when he resumed writing, Upton said.

"I did not want to just isolate the issues of racism just to the church," Upton said.

"I want this to touch the community, people in the work place and people in the church."

Local bookstores carry the book (Insight Publishing Group, \$14.99) and a book signing is scheduled Aug. 2 at Barnes & Noble at Rivertown Crossings in Grandville.